Soft power and forecasting influence

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Soft power? A systematic way to make the other party desire what you want? Who wouldn't be attracted by such a program? It suggests to please to appease, to be seductive to shape minds, to make other people share your values, to get international support...or the contrary.

The success of the concept, in economics and geopolitics is symptomatic: the idea that you could gain power - that is, increase the probability that the other will behave in the way you wish - softly, without using violence or giving counterparts has everything to please the occidental elites. The soft power and the hope of expanding it to the rest of the world are appealing to those who have already tasted success from their political and economic position and to those who are not too dissatisfied with the world as it is. When a single word serves so many purposes, it legitimately raises ideological suspicions.

Such ambiguities have a relationship with the evolution of the meaning of the word itself but also with its semantic "ecology" (the other words it replaces or generates) and with its "mediology"; that is, the material ways and means of such a "spiritual" process.[1]

Softly but surely

The term appears for the first time in a book by an academic who served under the Carter and Clinton administrations, Joseph S. Nye in his1990, '*Bound to Lead*'. Since then, hard, soft, or, a little bit later, smart power have become common categories in geopolitic debates, immediately understandable by power circles from Brazil to Japan.

Naturally, the idea of elaborating positive strategies to attract: exporting a model; presenting a favorable image of one's country; or negative ones to demonize an opponent; to create havoc among its allies or supporters; to it ..are anything but new. Such strategies combine to a certain degree persuasive ideologies, lifestyles, economical models,

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[1] Courmont B., *Chine, la grande séduction. Essai sur le soft power chinois*, A. Colin, 2009 - Fraser M., *Weapons of Mass Distraction: Soft Power and American Empire*, New York: Thomas Dunne 2005 - Huyghe F.B., *Maîtres du faire croire. De la propagande à l'influence*. Vuibert 2008 - Leonard, M. "Going Public: Diplomacy for the Information Society." Foreign Policy Center, 2005.

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cultural prestige, instrumentalising international organizations, networks, spreading a language, some intellectual, technical, juridical norms and religious proselytism.

Without even referring to the Sun Zi, Alexander the Great who succeeded in spreading the Greek aesthetic models and made himself recognized as the descendant of local gods, could be considered as a genius of soft power even after 24 centuries. But when J.S. Nye used the neologism it was at the right time, in the right country for a receptive audience. The program of shaping the world, mostly by seduction and attractiveness is typical of this period.

This syncretic notion refers to:

- a presumption of attractiveness based on the idea that any normal well informed individual should wish to share the American way of life; the American dream; US liberty; system and icons; components of prestige. The 2 H & 2 M principle is quite eloquent: Hollywood for the mainstream culture which pleases everybody; Harvard for the best science; Microsoft for technology and McDonalds for American consumption worldwide. Who could resist? To sum it up: what others seek to imitate.

A policy showing ostensible good will, being friendly to other countries, an open foreign policy and a strategy of benevolence sufficient not to spoil the advantage of the leading nation.

In Nye's view, soft power appears as a sort of immaterial capital to be measured in terms of exemplarity and conformity. Exemplarity of national performances, prosperity and desirability of a social and political system. Conformity of the products and symbols which will satisfy everybody's tastes and express a mainstream culture: it ranges from Spiderman to Faulkner; or from the hamburger to computers. Exerting soft power appears as a way of saving energy: fewer means of constraint or less force would be necessary to continue prevailing; but also less money; fewer subventions and counterparts. During the first period, in the 90's, soft power appeared as a way to replace hard power or, at least, make it less necessary. Such capital should prosper if not spoiled by unnecessarily provocative or authoritarian attitudes. Should the private companies, like CNN who became the channel which provided images to the whole world, do the job instead of the state, it would be even more beneficial. "Let it be" sounds like a very simple program.

Some of the means sound like a modern reformulation of classical influence diplomacy: keep networks in allied countries; give one's nation best image (branding). Some appear as modernized ways of propagating ideology on the basis of principles dating back to the beginning of the 20th century: helping friendly political parties abroad; propagating messages

intended for "winning their hearts and minds"; and showing the excellence of one's national model. Nye also recommends positive attitudes: favoring the Nation's attractiveness; subtly making the international agenda and keeping a clear consciousness of one's assets; values, culture and political practices. He also advocates a positive governmental strategy which could favor communication with other peoples and a multilateral attitude to encourage allies' cooperation.

To Professor Nye's credit, besides giving a sexy name to ancient methods: he clearly felt that civil society would play a bigger role; and that increasing soft power is not something which can be monitored from the White House; it requires a synergy with NGO's, creators, media and cultural industries. Nye also has the merit of pointing out the relationship between communication technologies and beliefs and the link between culture and ideology: the faculty which demonstrates the ability of the US to export mass culture as well as an elite or vanguard culture.

Is soft power a descriptive or prescriptive notion? On one side, it appears as an idealization of American predominance considered as a universal principle. On the other, it sounds like a program which could be duplicated by others, from the perspective of a global governance. Or to put it baldly: a mixture of narcissism and wishful thinking reflecting a temporary historic trend or a new key to History?

A partial answer was given by the success of the method in the rest of the world, various countries experimenting with variations of the initial concept:

Winning new markets by promoting norms of economic and cultural behaviors: weighting on the decisions of international organizations; having allies; animating political or religious networks abroad; using professional services to promote one's national branding; using NGO's and moral or cultural authorities; not to mention financing international TV information channels or online publications; there is probably no Nation who did not try. Israël has initiated "*hasbarah*" campaigns (meaning more or less "explanation") through networks of sympathizers and campaigns online. Even Switzerland tried to correct its image by "Nation Branding". Not to mention Qatar (soccer and al Jazeera) and Bahrain (contemporary art and architecture). It could be aesthetic styles and genres (like Japanese manga) or any element that creates familiarity with a country's way of thinking or its accomplishments, is more efficient than explicit messages like "we are leading a just war" or "our economic policy is a triumph" throughofficialchannels.

China, which explicitly uses the term "soft power", is obviously leading a great seduction operation which includes: Confucius institutes;

national cinematographic industry; information TV in several languages; great events like the Olympic Games of 2008 (with it's incredible opening ceremony directed by Zhan Yimou); constant references to Silk Roads and several others stereotype that speaks to the western imagination. Is Russia's soft power negligible? The over-reaction of the American military to the supposed incredible efficiency of Putin's "disinformation" through media like Russia Today (a sort of reversed *Voice of America*, half a century later); social networks and populist circles in Europe, proves the contrary.

And France? Without going back to Louis XIV, whose prestige policy was renowned, there is a tradition of cultural diplomacy: the "Alliance Française" was created in 1883 with the explicit purpose of making international elites more francophile; the same idea which inspired cultural attachés and international media like Radio France Internationale, TV5 or France 24 etc. It goes with the idea of being the universal Nation of human rights but also with various public institutions and governmental agencies devoted to cinema, books, etc. Recently the notions of economic diplomacy and sport diplomacy confirmed this very French trend to research influence.

Obviously there is an international competition of seduction as if every Nation wanted to convince every foreign citizen.

Soft power and hard times

What happens when hard times come back and when the "universal Nation" realizes that it has enemies again and not only competitors? After 9/11, the US discovered the problem of "why do they hate us?: is that one had to integrate the notion that CNN and GAFA were not the best tools to lessen a metaphysical hostility formulated by Al Qaeda; a defensive jihad to retaliate for the secular persecution led by Crusaders and Jews. Bad news: ISIS has since shifted toward an "offensive" jihad.

Besides invading Afghanistan, one of the most significant US reactions was a semantic one: soft power became "smart"; public diplomacy became fashionable again.

For instance, J.S. Nye produced the mantra of smart power, immediately endorsed by his admirer Hillary Clinton.[2] The idea is to use (smartly) a combination of military strategies, political, economic, but also cultural ones and communication. Some might object that this phraseology

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[2] Nye J.S. *Cyberpower*, Harvard University, 2011 - Nye, J. S., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics New York*: Public Affairs, 2004.

refers to a millennial practice: sometimes you negotiate; sometimes you fight; sometimes you seduce; Pericles and many others knew that policy, which could be labelled as realism. But the idea was successful. Formerly everything that was soft was more or less labelled as a Democrat program, while Republicans tended to favor "public diplomacy". Created during the Cold War, celebrated by Ronald Reagan as a great contribution to the fall of the Wall, public diplomacy clearly has a more aggressive tone, it's a weapon of the ideological fight between the two blocks. This strange diplomacy, which addresses peoples abroad and not by diplomatic channels, was a reply to the popularity of Marxism among "brother" parties and intelligentsia. During several decades, the American taxpayer's money served to finance broadcasting in various foreign languages and exporting cultural content to counter the world view dominating on the other side of the Iron Curtain. This was mostly the work of the US Information Agency. Human networks were not neglected, many future leaders or opinion-leaders were invited to visit the USA and discover its "real image".

Of course during the 90's the disappearance of the main enemy (and the prospect of liquidating the last archaic autocrats who were obstructing a New World Order) were not in favour of offensive public diplomacy. Nor was the fact that CNN and mainstream cultural industries were doing the job of making the US popular more effectively than would a bureaucratic State agency. The same was said about the Internet (at that time the Web 1.0 version) which should unify the world through the virtues of technology.

After 9/11 some old reflexes were automatically reactivated: the second reaction of G.W. Bush, just after bombing Afghanistan, was to recreate an Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy. Public Diplomacy was back again. It was supposed to have disappeared with the USSR, as its defunct function: encouraging dissent; leading a subversive action against an ideological system; and making the occidental system more attractive to better informed Russians, Serbs, Germans, etc. The methods which were used against a centralized and territorial bureaucracy had to be reshaped to fight a borderless ideology of a clandestine voluntary network.

But public diplomacy was appealing again to the West. Germany got its politische *Öffentlichkeitsarbeit*, the Netherlands their *publieksdiplomatie* and Nato had soon its own Public Diplomacy Division. The slogan of "new public diplomacy" appeared to designate a less centralized policy which would also be channeled by NGO and social networks, but the general idea remained the same.

Nowadays, it's more difficult to distinguish a soft power policy (supposedly left wing) from a public diplomacy policy (presumed to be more conservative) as the flourishing concepts the leading circles love to produce like strategic influence, e-diplomacy, *psyops*, storytelling, don't contribute to clarification.

Public diplomacy which implies the deconstruction of an adverse ideology and soft power which evokes a more inclusive or seductive approach, appear as the two poles of a new current. Once abandoned, the innocent belief that everybody wants to be like us, if only connected to the Net, and once reconsidered the idea that hostility and ideological competition were obsolete, the distinction becomes less sensitive.

Three main trends seem to emerge. Syncretism: public diplomacy is more and more conceived as a way to end restoration of soft power which does not prevail so automatically. Privatization: while States and their armies rediscover the alchemy of influence, private actors like the Soro's Open Society or the Albert Einstein Foundation seek to exert a greater ideological influence, including by monitoring dissident national groups. Virtualization: the process tends to move from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0. While big companies tend to develop their influence online and rely so much on their community managers to protect them, no wonder that armies and governmental or non-governmental organizations tend to do the same.

Ways and means of influence

Beyond the old question of delivering the right "message" and channeling it to as many people as possible, unexpected problematics surged. Mc Luhan's mantra "Message is medium" has to be reinterpreted.[3]

Firstly, because occidental elites were prone to overestimate the intrinsic democratic power of the Internet. The so called Arab Spring made popular the hypothesis that social media allowing anyone to get informed, to express himself and to cooperate with his peers would automatically guarantee the victory of democrats versus the old fashioned autocrats who used to spread their propaganda from top to bottom. Experience showed that things changed when cyber dissidents had to go into a classical electoral process and that, due to their "learning curve", dictators or jihadists were not bad at using social media. Technologically modern tools

[3] Observatoire géostratégique de l'information, "Diplomatie publique, soft power, influence d'État", Iris, Juillet 2011.

do not guarantee the predominance of politically correct content, nor does it filter archaic ideas.

The second factor is that technology besides opening the game of influence to new actors, also changes the rules of efficiency. It evolves from the logic of delivering an inherently persuasive rhetoric to the widest possible audience: to catching attention and trust; to make every target a potential cooperator.

On one side, conducting a national influence policy cannot be a short term activity: if it is deliberate, it has to rely on a coherent policy and a constant strategic scope. Influence does not come out of the blue, but it has to integrate historical memories and existing stereotypes of a people, it's character, it's food, it's representative great men, its customs and culture, it's political ambitions etc. But even taking into account those limits, influence policies can greatly vary in their forms and by their scopes. Obviously exacerbating the other blocks contradiction (promising the people behind the Wall a prosperity and a freedom they dreamed of), celebrating globalization as an irresistible and glorious sense of History, or trying to convince jihadists that they should abandon "violent extremism" in favor of "moderate Islam" are three different tasks.

They require specific messages and the last one - directed toward would-be jihadists, is anything but clear in its present form. Counter-propaganda generally hesitates between: revealing to the focused audience "truths"; what every newspaper or TV in the world repeats several times a day, if you go to Syria you will kill and die. The problem is that it is exactly what they want to do: accomplish hijrah; to live under the caliphate's law; jihad to avenge the persecution endured by the true monotheists; and martyrdom to win Paradise.

Reducing the attraction of jihad to a psychological or sociological problem may be due to an historic resentment based on bad interpretation: nothing that could be cured by a form of assistance and pedagogy; "demonstrating" one's benevolence -we don't hate Islam and it has nothing to do with authentic religion"; for the most audacious, naming the enemy-Salafi jihadist doctrine; instead of referring to mysterious entities like "violent extremism" or "radicalism".

We are not very efficient at formulating the right "counter" message: the one which would concurrence the promise of heaven; plus the prospect of conquering the world after a last eschatological battle; plus the opportunity to retaliate for any humiliation ever suffered by Moslems.

Worst, influence does not rely only on the good message and sufficient public funds. Getting the right media is also a necessity: it appears crucial once you realize that national mass media, even with the

support of international satellite TV did convince a good part of the planets minds. Therefore, the problem of controlling social media and prohibiting "their" message being accessible becomes a priority (a paradox, only five years after everyone celebrated the uncontrolled Google or Twitter revolutions in Arab countries). The chosen answer often combines censorship with more sophisticated methods, like Jigsaw from Google whose algorithms are supposed to monitor suspicious requests and to send those who could be searching for jihadist content, to good de-radicalization content. But the specificity of social media and online communities is a part of the problem: it creates semi-private spaces which are ideal for a group who wishes to reject the rest of the world and to confirm itself to its faith.

The limit of soft powers attractiveness is also the mental ecology of those who have already adopted a different code: for instance; advocating democracy to those who are already convinced that any form of man's law is an offense to Gods law; has a limited effect. Mediation is also a decisive factor: human beings are influenced by human beings and the Isis doctrine is spread by correspondents and members of the same community, not only the sudden contact of young minds with shocking images.

Social networks are the field of a new competition to catch attention (visitors, followers, "*likers*", new members, links, recommendations, quotations...), what one would call gaining e-influence. A game where the strong and the affluent are not necessarily the winners when it comes to attracting more than distributing. For instance the effective visibility of messages can be altered by the simple enthusiasm of militant communities or by simple cheating. Recently the existence of "Kremlin trolls" was revealed: employees are paid to intervene systematically on discussions online to express a view favorable to Russia or to literally sabotage the debate. But recently and on a very modest scale, the UE have also financed a brigade of "e-influencers". The process known as "astroturfing" which consists of creating false movements of opinion by creating false online supporters (in reality simple algorithms) understandably concerns hundreds of companies.

Message, Media, Mental world, Mediations: each step can be an obstacle. But the bigger "M" problem is "*meta*": meta-beliefs or meta-values, the principles that are beyond. And obviously, in the opposition with the jihadi fascination, our main handicap is our incapacity to understand choices which are commanded by such a different logic. After all, our soft power is revealing more of what we are and we are erroneous to think universally what the others are and how they might change.